

Bush Is Right About Lithuania

By IRVING KRISTOL

There are inherent ambiguities in the American approach to foreign affairs. We are being driven by a team of four horses, each with a mind of its own, and it is no easy matter to prevent them from tearing the stagecoach apart. The four horses, representing four established modes of thought about our posture toward the world, are:

- Moralistic isolationism, in which the U.S. presents a shining example of popular government to the world, in the hope that the nations of the world will notice, be impressed, and eventually follow suit. We may be saddened if they fail to do so, but it is not our responsibility to guide them—and certainly not to coerce them—along this path. At most, we may express approval or disapproval of their more extreme deviations.

- Liberal internationalism, a 70-year-old tradition that has taken tenacious root in the State Department, the media, academia, and even—though to a far lesser degree—among sections of the populace at large. This envisions a world in which all nations are obedient to the rules of international law, as laid down by the United Nations and the World Court—a “peace loving” world to be governed eventually by a “parliament of man” (now re-designated as a “parliament of persons”). Our State Department is much attached to the legalisms generated by such a perspective. Most of the other nations in today’s world pay little or no attention to it.

Democratic Capitalism

- Conservative internationalism, which believes the U.S. has an original commitment to act unilaterally so as to make the world safe for “democratic capitalism.”

- National-interest “realism,” which generally prefers unilateral American action to any multilateral commitment, but asserts that we should be seriously concerned only about events abroad that affect us seriously, less seriously concerned by what affects us only indirectly or obliquely or remotely, and not at all concerned by what is likely to have no appreciable effect at all. This is a more complicated affair than many realists seem to realize, since the U.S. is a world power and

both its action and inaction can be equally influential. But it is the most venerable mode of thought about foreign policy, to which most nations, most of the time, pay obeisance. In the case of the U.S., it often is co-opted by one of the three other modes, since no one wants to assert that he is indifferent to something called “the national interest.”

These four modes of thought are now thoroughly entangled in the case of Lithuania. Such entanglements are predestined. We discovered this in the case of Vietnam. Our moralistic isolationists—fewer than now—saw no reason for our becoming bloodily involved in this faraway land, and

pendence from the U.S.S.R. Then he announced that he is working on some complicated scheme whereby the various ethnic regions of the Soviet Union would gain not only a large measure of autonomy, but also the right of secession after a complex legal process of at least five years’ duration. This inevitably inflamed nationalist aspirations in the Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere. Then—to no one’s great surprise—he sent troops into Lithuania.

He had an obvious, clear-cut alternative. He could have said, right at the outset, that Lithuania would not be allowed to secede from the Soviet Union, but that it would be accorded a real autonomy.

withdrawal of Russia into its ancient ethnic boundaries. Not even the more militant reformers within the Soviet Union contemplate such a possibility. In fact, these same reformers have been prudently silent about Lithuania, since they are well aware of the larger and more explosive issue of national disintegration it poses. It is not imaginable that any Russian government, with or without Mr. Gorbachev, would move down this path.

Lithuania is not a lucky country. Perhaps, in a future not yet foreseeable, under circumstances also unforeseeable, it will gain the independence it desires and deserves. But it is not going to happen now, and there is nothing the Bush administration can do about it. Meanwhile, the Lithuanians would be well advised to bargain hard for the maximum degree of autonomy.

Nevertheless, the administration is coming under much criticism for recognizing this political reality. There is even talk of economic sanctions against the Soviet Union. But this is idle chatter. We tried that under the Carter administration and it backfired. Besides, not a single one of our European allies would join us in any such purely symbolic, totally ineffectual act.

Vulnerable to Criticisms

The Bush administration, quite sensibly, has decided that it is not in the national interest for the U.S. to precipitate a crisis in our relations with the Soviet Union because of Lithuania and the other Baltic nations. In doing so, it has left itself vulnerable to criticisms emerging from the other currents of thought about American foreign policy. As a consequence, it has difficulty articulating sharply, and defending vigorously, its position. Any American administration would find itself in the same condition.

Back in the 1960s, we heard much talk about “speaking truth to power.” In the case of American foreign policy, it is clear that we have not yet learned how power can speak unambiguous truths about our national interest to the American people.

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would have been content with a few symbolic, diplomatic gestures. Our liberal internationalists got us into the war in order to affirm the illegality of aggression, direct or indirect, by one nation against another. Our conservative internationalists, along with our realists, were divided, depending on what they saw to be at stake. Some said that we should simply stay out, others that we should boldly confront North Vietnam (and perhaps China) to prevent a Communist takeover of Southeast Asia, and keep open the prospects for democracy there. None supported the limited war we did fight.

In the case of Lithuania, it must be said, our confusion is more than matched by Mikhail Gorbachev’s confused policies. Indeed, one has the right to wonder: Does Mr. Gorbachev know what he is doing? Is there any rational explanation, however devious, for his fumbling, irresolute, in the end bewildering and self-defeating approach to this issue?

I don’t see any such rational explanation. First, he announced that he would not use force against Lithuania, thereby inciting the Lithuanians to declare their inde-

pendence from the U.S.S.R. Then he announced that he is working on some complicated scheme whereby the various ethnic regions of the Soviet Union would gain not only a large measure of autonomy, but also the right of secession after a complex legal process of at least five years’ duration. This inevitably inflamed nationalist aspirations in the Ukraine, Georgia and elsewhere. Then—to no one’s great surprise—he sent troops into Lithuania.

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